

What to Listen for in a High-Quality, Inclusive, Rich Oral Language Preschool Learning Environment

The gift of communication makes us human and is the foundation for learning and development in all domains (cited works by Snow et al). Interactive, two-way communication among children and among children and adults helps to establish positive relationships which serve as the foundation for emotional, social, health, physical, cognitive, and literacy development (See Rosenkoetter & Knapp-Philo, 2006 for research review). Children who do not hear a lot of talk and who are not encouraged to talk themselves often have problems learning to read. (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborne, 2003). According to the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2005), broad language abilities such as narrative knowledge, semantics, syntax, morphology and vocabulary play a significant role in predicting early literacy abilities. This large longitudinal study found that "language provides more than a foundation of reading per se. It offers a foundation for learning to learn" (p. 440). In fact, the National Early Literacy Panel found that children's oral language abilities are among the most significant predictors of later literacy learning (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). Children without good oral language skills and large vocabularies tend to fall behind in third and fourth grade (Chall & Jacobs, 2003).

Oral language is a child's ability to understand and use spoken/signed words and sentences. Preschoolers begin to develop these specific oral language abilities:

- Understand and use increasingly complex sentences
- Understand and use a growing vocabulary both in quantity and diversity of words
- Attend to language for longer periods of time, such as when books are read, people are telling stories, and during conversations
- Consistently respond to requests for information or action (e.g., respond to questions and follow one- and two-step directions)
- Comprehend and use language for multiple social and cognitive purposes (e.g., understand and talk about feelings, create and enact "roles, establish/maintain relationships)
- Develop familiarity with sounds in words (e.g., listening to, identifying, recognizing, discriminating)
- Understand that people communicate in many ways, including through gestures, sign language, facial expressions and augmentative communication devices
- Use verbal and non-verbal language (gestures, devices, signs and picture symbols) to communicate for multiple purposes (e.g., to express wants, needs, ideas, feelings and to relate personal information and experiences)
- Describe experiences and create and/or retell simple stories
- Ask questions and make comments related to the topic of discussion

Foundations: Early Learning Standards for NC Preschoolers and Strategies to Guide Their Success, NC DPI (2003)

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Visit NC's Preschool Demonstration Programs. For more information:
http://www.osr.nc.gov/_pdf/DPIDemoPreschoolProgramCombined.pdf

A Guide for Administrators, Teachers and Families

"Everyday activities of all sorts, accompanied by interesting talk with lots of new vocabulary play an important part in children's language and literacy development."

Dickinson & Tabors, 2001, p.330

Promoting Oral Language Development

In A Rich-Oral Language Environment

- Children:
 - Talk more than adults by describing their efforts, ideas, and creations
 - Have multiple ways to communicate
 - Tell and act-out their stories (Paley, 2004)
- Adults:
 - Build on children's home language and interests
 - Use positive, specific language
 - Really listen and show true interest in what children are doing and saying
 - Reflect on what children are doing
 - Encourage rather than praise
 - Label children's feelings, e.g., "your tears make me think you are sad"
 - Ask open-ended, action questions and give suggestions/support for answers
 - Encourage choice & rule making
 - Have real conversations with each child everyday
 - Share information, books, and stories
 - Make sure all children have a way to communicate with words, gestures, and pictures
 - Use a variety of words and help children learn at least 2 new words everyday
 - Model appropriate syntax



Follow the CAR

Notari-Syverson, Maddox, & Cole (1999) developed a training videotape for adults to learn how to talk with children ages two-to-five as they talk together. They suggest "Following the CAR" when talking with young children:

- Comment on what the child is looking at, touching, or talking about and WAIT FIVE SECONDS
- Ask questions about what the child is looking at, touching, or talking about and WAIT FIVE SECONDS
- Respond by adding a little more to the child's response

Resources for obtaining this training video, "Language is the Key: Talking and Books" which describes the "Following the CAR" strategy, include www.wri.org/www/wri.org/bookplay; <http://www.ncl-eclibrary.org/>; Preschool Demonstration Program (list available at <http://www.governor.state.nc.us/Office/Education/home.asp> under training and conferences).



Hold Real Conversations

One of the most effective strategies for enhancing vocabulary development and comprehension of language beyond the word level is to hold at least one "real" conversation that enhances vocabulary and language development with each child every day. A "real" conversation is described as being of interest to the child and having 3-4 turns or exchanges between the adult and child (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2004).

Strategies

- Make time to hold real conversations with each child everyday (Hart & Risely, 2003; Plaut et al., 2005)
- Converse about books, songs, stories, and experiences
- Use children's interests as a basis for conversation
- Speak courteously to children
- Plan or take advantage of spontaneous opportunities to talk with each child informally
- Refrain from talking judgmentally about children/others to them or in front of them
- Show affection and sincere interest in children
- Send consistent verbal and non verbal messages
- Invite children into extended conversations with peers and adults
- Listen attentively to what children have to say
- Develop skills to hold conversations with children through training, feedback, and practice

The "Art" of Conversing with Children

An adult's skill in carrying on meaningful and facilitative conversations with young children is reflective of how highly developed she/he is in the "Art of Teaching". Many consider holding conversations to be the primary teaching technique of early childhood educators, however, language facilitation during play is a technique which must be developed over time. Facilitating language and higher order thinking skills must be intentionally and explicitly implemented in an implicit way during play.

Research shows that teachers tend to display "verbal domination" in their language behavior in the classroom, and that their instructional approach tends to be "linear" (e.g., one-way questions, one-way response), rather than reciprocal (e.g., open-ended questions with two or three way responses between adult and child; Dickinson, et al, 2004).

One way for a teacher to assess how he/she is doing is to have another person videotape a play session during center time. Listen for the number of times you:

- Use open-ended questions
- Describe the child's actions
- Repeat what the child said and added a little more information
- Comment on an object and described its function, size, shape, or other meaningful attribute.
- Reflect on the quality of the conversation, as well as the length of verbal interaction.

Assess and Improve the Language Richness of the Environment

All learning environments, indoors and outdoors should have interesting, open ended material for children to explore and use for building and creating. "Let's give 'em something to talk about" really applies when working with young children!

- One strategy for increasing the quality and quantity of interactions between adults and children is for instructors, mentors, and supervisors to use environmental assessments of teacher-child interactions and conversations. Teachers and/or administrators wishing to assess and improve the "Language Richness of a Classroom" may decide to utilize a portion or all of a rating scale at the beginning and end of school year in an attempt to measure teacher progress. One suggestion is to put a goal to "increase the language richness of my classroom" on the Independent Growth Plan and then use a pre- and post- environmental language measure to document progress and inform change. Several scales that may be used as pre- and post- measures of progress are listed under References and Resources.

Example High-Quality Rich Oral Language Environments

- ECERS-R (item 18) Exemplary
 - Staff have individual conversations with most of the children everyday
 - Children are asked questions to encourage them to give longer and more complex answers (younger child is asked "what" or "where" questions; older child is asked "why" or "how" questions)
- ELLCO (item 6) Exemplary
 - The tone of classroom conversations is positive and shows respect for children's contributions, encouraging children to speak from their different perspectives and experience
 - Teachers listen attentively to children, encourage children to listen to each other, and deliberately foster a climate in which differing opinions & ideas are valued
 - Teachers display fairness in treatment of children from differing ability gender, racial, and cultural groups
- ECERS-R (item 32) Exemplary
 - Staff seem to enjoy being with the children
 - Staff encourage the development of mutual respect between children and adults (staff wait until children finish asking questions before answering; encourage children in a polite way to listen when adults speak)
 - ELLCO (item 7) Exemplary
 - Teachers appear to be aware of children's oral language abilities, considering both normative and individual patterns of development in 1st and 2nd language
 - Teachers plan sufficient time for conversations.
 - Children are systematically encouraged to use oral language to share experiences, discuss and plan activities for broader intellectual purposes (e.g., analyzing, predicting, problem solving, reflecting on learning)
 - Goals & opportunities for extended use of oral language are coordinated with goals for literacy and content area learning
 - Regular, intentional efforts are made to expand children's vocabulary



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